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MARK TITMARSH

Walk the Talk: the politics of artists who write, Part 1 & Part 2

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A survey of the historical phenomenon of visual artists who also write and publish on the context of their own contemporary practice.

Walk the Talk: the politics of artists who write part 1
by Mark Titmarsh

Historically artists have always done much more than simply make work. Unlike other professions with strict demarcations artists have habitually occupied multiple positions within the terrain that makes up the art world. Thus artists continue to be critics (Donald Judd, Robert Rooney, Tracey Clement, Alex Gawronski), theorists (Ian Burn, Robert Smithson, Peter Halley, David Batchelor), historians (Ian Burn, Bernard Smith), curators (Richard Grayson, Tony Tuckson, Ian Burn, and all those artists running ARIs), collectors (most artists have a significant collection of other artists' work), gallerists (James Dorahy, Scott Donovan, ARIs), and audiences, since a significant proportion of any artist's audience is other artists.

It was not until the 1960s that the professionalisation of the arts drove a wedge into this informal system and created new separate competing disciplines of artist, curator, critic, and so on. Yet at the same time a growing awareness of the artworld's ecology has shown the deep interconnectivity of all those positions. The most notable hybrid receiving recent critical attention has been the artist-musician and the supposed synchronicity between musical practice, abstraction, chromatic scales and composition. The hybrid of art and writing remains largely unacknowledged, probably because it defies an old supposition that art should speak for itself and trained writers are better suited for articulating the complexities of art.

HISTORY OF ARTIST WRITERS

Art and critical investigation have never been very far apart. Renaissance humanism saw no mutually exclusive polarities between the sciences and the arts, and the ancient Greeks valued artistic above scientific insight. Leonardo da Vinci as both artist and inventor saw into the mechanism of things producing both artistic and scientific outcomes. His notes and drawings done on loose papers contained grocery lists together with detailed notes for paintings, anatomical drawings of dead babies, and plans for helicopters and hang gliders. His writings are a precursor of the artists' journal, interested in everything for the sake of understanding the world, so that art might be practised more precisely and more meaningfully.

Artists writing about their own practice spiked in the late 19th century with the modern artists Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh in particular, whose 600 letters to his brother Theo forms the basis of an art historical understanding of his work and the whole Impressionist milieu. Early 20th century writings by Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, and de Chirico give an insight into

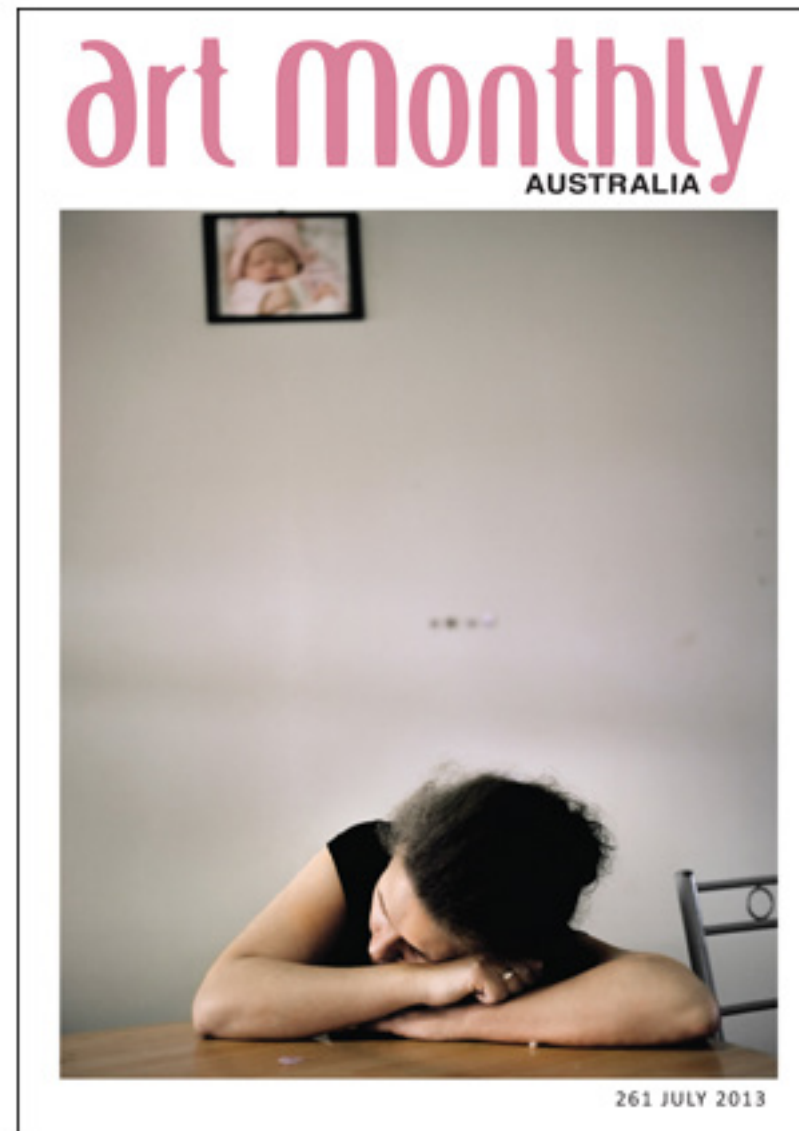
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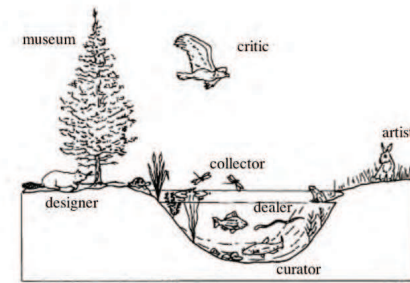
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Walk the Talk: the politics of artists who write, part 1



Mark Titmarsh, 'art landscape' diagram, undated; image courtesy the artist

Walk the Talk: the politics of artists who write

MARK TITMARSH

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Jacques Ranciere, 2006

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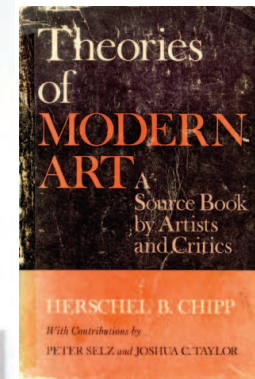
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GENRES OF ARTIST WRITINGS

An avalanche of words pours from the artist's pen in unpublished forms, private correspondence, grant applications, journals, artist books, and notebooks. Prominent examples of these are by Vincent van Gogh, Peter Beard, and George Maciunas whose various notes and diagrams have come to make up an important part of our knowledge and experience of art practice. Artists also write directly into artworks, as became significant during the time of Conceptual Art, with Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Joseph Kosuth, and Ian Burn, and in neo-Conceptual work by Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Christopher Wool, and Richard Prince. This lineage of word art can be traced back to Cubism where the word became an intrinsic part of experimental painting as it veered towards abstraction.

Outside of the exhibited artwork, but inspired by it, artists began to write systematically about their own context of thinking and making in publications or magazines that they sometimes worked for, or for magazines they created themselves. Artists wrote reviews and related articles for publication in journals and books on aesthetics and art theory: for example, Donald Judd in *Arts Magazine*, Ian Burn in *Art-Language*, Victor Burgin in several books, myself in *On the Beach*, and Lily Hibberd in *un magazine*.

In all these ways and more, artists write about art, produce texts that appear 'beside' art, 'in' art, or are 'about' art. Such writing by an artist can reveal something about their own work and preconceptions, or indeed be part of their visual practice.



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clockwise from top left: Christian Marclay, David Bowie, 1991, from the series *Body Mix*; along with book covers for *Theories of Modern Art* and *Art-Language*, and internal pages from *The Fox*, No. 2, 1975



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From the 1980s onwards Peter Halley, David Batchelor, Liam Gillick, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe showed

that artists could write with as much insight and literary talent as any critic might in understanding and articulating the changing conditions of abstraction, new media, and the expanded fields of painting, video and sculpture.

In Australia Bernard Smith sublimated his own painting practice so that he could document his contemporaries. Ian Burn developed published writing as an artform in itself, and Imants Tillers in a series of publications in *Art & Text* magazine defined an entire generation of postmodern painterly appropriation.

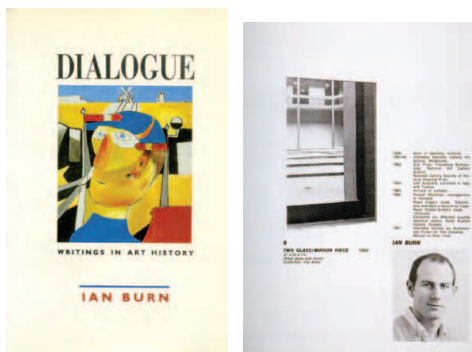
Consequently Australia has produced a swathe of artists who find articulating their context as important as making work for exhibition. Artists such as Alex Gawronski, Lisa Kelly, Reuben Keehan, Dominique and Dan Angeloro (Soda_Jerk), Tom Nicholson, Zanny Begg, Adam Geczy, Lily Hibberd, Mark Titmarsh, Gail Hastings, Christopher Dean and John Conomos divide their time between the studio, the gallery, and the word processor in an attempt to more fully develop the practice of contemporary art.

MAJOR PUBLICATIONS OF ARTISTS' WRITINGS

Art historians and theorists have gathered artists' written statements together usually as a form of privileged insight into the work and thinking of an acknowledged master. However when Herschel B. Chipp compiled a wide selection of artist writings from Post Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism, the result was less personal or psychological and more

MARK TITMARSH Temple

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1/ Book cover for Ian Burn's *Dialogue, Writings in Art History*
2/ Ian Burn entry in catalogue for *The Field* exhibition, 1968, curated by Burn for the inauguration of the National Gallery of Victoria

Recently the contextual model of artists writings has been creatively adapted in the Whitechapel series of *Documents of Contemporary Art*, with each book focusing on a single theme such as Colour, Sound, The Everyday, Appropriation, and so on. These texts, usually edited by an artist or critic directly associated with the subject matter, tend to function like artistic collages of writing and ideas, ranging in content from entire essays to single sentences.

ARTISTS THINK WITH THEIR EYES OPEN

One of the most important artist writers of the 20th century was Ian Burn, an Australian artist who was also the major conceptual artist of the 1960s and 1970s figuring in both the English and American fronts of Conceptual Art. With Mel Ramsden and others he developed various magazines including *Art-Language* during his time in London in the late 1960s. When he moved from there to NYC he worked with Joseph Kosuth and others on the major US conceptual art magazine, *The Fox*. While in NYC Burn also staged and curated the important conceptual art survey exhibition *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* at the New York Cultural Center in 1970. As Burn wrote at the time, 'for any work to be "conceptually germane", or "real", or "art", it must confront and develop the discourse of art that sustains it'.¹

Burn trained at the National Gallery School Melbourne in the early 1960s in the painting studio. His first works were figurative abstractions that later evolved into geometric abstraction, with examples shown in the landmark *Field* exhibition of 1968 at the NGV. He soon abandoned painting for glass and mirror based constructions, and eventually moved beyond objects altogether in favour of texts. In the 1980s he took his radical practice into everyday life providing visual services for the Australian Union Movement. In the last few years of work before his untimely death in 1993 he returned to a synthesis of painting and text-based works. His enduring international reputation as one of the major figures of

Book covers for *Documents of Contemporary Art (Colour)* and David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*



Conceptual art is based mostly on his activities in London and NYC, though more attention is gradually coming to his whole life practice.

Why did writing become so crucial for Burn, an artist who had studied approvingly under the famous landscape painter Fred Williams? And what could writing do for an artist's practice? As Burn puts it: 'I was first involved with the object, then there was a theory or framework contingent on the object, then the object become contingent on the theory, and finally in the current work there is the theory or framework itself.'²

Burn's most well known publications are his texts for *Art-Language*, *The Fox*, *ArtForum*, several catalogue essays, and two books that came out shortly before his death, *National Life and Landscape* (1990), and *Dialogue* (1991), a compilation of his essays. Perhaps the point of all this writing is condensed in a statement he made in his catalogue essay for the exhibition *Looking at Seeing and Reading* (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 1993). Burn argued that 'discursive factors produce our seeing' and that 'self criticality glimpses the political entailed in cultures of seeing'.³ It is this same idea that Jacques Ranciere develops when he argues that the distribution of the sensible, including the visual in art, is a political act. As he puts it, 'the system of boundaries that define what is visible or perceivable within any particular culture' can be challenged by 'new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjects'.⁴

Such is the work of the artist writer, the artist who 'thinks with their eyes open'⁵ thereby establishing 'regimes of sensible intensity ... between modes of being, modes of saying and modes of making'.⁶ As a result 'they form uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories and languages'.⁷

ART WRITING ART

Similar issues concerning the distribution of the sensible and the regime of the visible arise in the current atmosphere of doctoral research for artists. In an age of globalised knowledge, many artists have undertaken studio-led PhD research that requires 'languageing' as the task of exegesis.

Consequently they find themselves in a conflict between the scientific rational demands of the university based on new knowledge and the radical difference of visual intelligence. Between these competing modes of saying and making, artists begin to develop a new enunciative community that emerges in the tension between writing a thesis, producing art in the turbulence of the studio, and quantifying those outcomes in an assessable exhibition.

The thesis, the most problematic aspect of the process, usually involves three stages. Firstly, the artist's way of being is identified by a kind of everyday ethnographic reading that generates a description of the practice, but not its significance, or how it generates meaning, and how it fits into a professional context.

To fill that gap another mode of understanding is required, involving an extra level of theory based on art history and critical theory which places the artist within an established genre of professional practice, usually grounded in conceptual, minimal or popist precedents. At this point art theory begins to reveal its limitations; it can say what is known about art and artworks in an historical or epistemological sense but is inadequate in showing 'how' art is, *ipso facto*. To get deeper than theory or practice requires something closer to a philosophical enquiry into the being of art itself. This in turn requires a demolition of traditional aesthetics and the creation of post-aesthetics or an ontology of art. No wonder many artists struggle with a satisfactory outcome and why universities scramble for the kneejerk safety of scientific repeatability.

The risk art takes in becoming a subject of doctoral research is that the visual will continually be folded back into the textual. The excess of the visual over text is not simply a matter of translation. Nor is it satisfied by considering the visual as a language with the same status as a written text as, say, in semiotics.

As Wittgenstein suggested, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.⁸ Hence the visual, at times outside the chatter of language, rests in inscrutable silence, not beyond being

conceptual in overview. The book *Theories of Modern Art* (1968) remains a highly authoritative account of aesthetic thinking and cultural momentum in the arts from the end of the 19th century to mid-20th century. The title signals a new interest in theory, contra Clement Greenberg, the most influential critic of the day, who believed the evolution of modern art was 'immanent to practice' only. In Chipp's compendium, the writings of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian take an exemplary place, articulating the arrival and growth of abstract art, paralleled by a profusion of new theoretical models and languages.

Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a sourcebook of artists' writings (1996, K. Stiles and P. Seltz, eds) was devised as a sequel to Chipp's pioneering work. It documented the paradigm shift from postwar modernism to late-20th century postmodernism and the so-called rise of the theory industry in art. *Blasted Allegories: an anthology of writings by contemporary artists* (1989, Brian Wallis, ed.) is an even more specific look at the postmodern moment through the writings of Laurie Anderson, Dan Graham, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Matt Mullican, Richard Prince, Martha Rosler and others. Mara Witzling's two important compilations, *Voicing Our Visions* (1991) and *Voicing Today's Visions* (1994), captured the personal and aesthetic issues of women artists from the 19th and 20th centuries.

The dominant model for this kind of compilation was radically revised in 1992 with the publication of *Art in Theory, 1900–1990* by Charles Harrison and Paul Woods. While acknowledging the importance of Chipp, the book updates earlier periods with new historical information, particularly recently acquired texts on Russian art and new understandings of Surrealism. Most of important of all is the way Harrison and Wood chose to place the artist writings in the context of other writings by critics, philosophers and political figures. As a result of precise condensation, the book is vastly inclusive while building a commanding overview of specific artistic arguments and larger cultural developments across decades and national borders. In Australia, this model was followed closely by Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad in *Modernism and Australia Documents on Art, Design and Architecture* (2007).

8 ARTISTS
18 May to 14 July 2013

Wayne Emerson • Jeff McCann
Angela Coombs Matthews • Kellie Hulm
Vic McEwan • Scott Lea
Jacqui Meyers • Julia Davies

Artists is supported by the NSW Government through Arts NSW and Ageing, Disability and Home Care. This exhibition is a partnership between Eastern Rivers Arts, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and ArtSpace Wagga.

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known altogether, but only to be pointed at like some unreachable star. Heidegger attempted to embrace this silence through the practice of formal indication, referring to the contingent nature of something in an attempt to get to its essence. In Heidegger's practice, this resulted in the destruction of language and the creation of graphic hybrids where words are scored through with a line or an ex. As Miguel de Beistegui puts it, 'can't we see art as precisely not-language? Must we not acknowledge a certain resistance on its part to philosophical discourse, whose tendency is, coming out of language, always to return to language, and return everything to it, instead of pausing and lingering before art's almost excessive visibility?'⁹

POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

For Ranciere it is this partitioning of the sensible, between the visual and its other, between the acts of making, seeing, and saying that constitutes the political structure at the heart of any aesthetic regime. Thus aesthetics, more than a way of thinking about art, is a distribution of sensibility and power across individual roles ranging from thinking and deciding to manufacturing and production. This schema of artistic production 'unites the act of manufacturing with the act of bringing to light, the act of defining a new relationship between making and seeing. Art anticipates work because it carries out its principle: the transformation of sensible matter into the community's self presentation.'¹⁰ Ranciere might be riffing on a Marxist conflict between managerial and working classes, but he is also preparing the ground for a critique of what we might call political art:

The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an 'awareness' of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.¹¹

Thus regardless of content, even if there is no content, as in a monochrome painting or deliberately empty gallery space, art can be articulate in its contrariness to the demands of rational, productive, economic thinking. Art as such functions as a constant interrogation of the figures

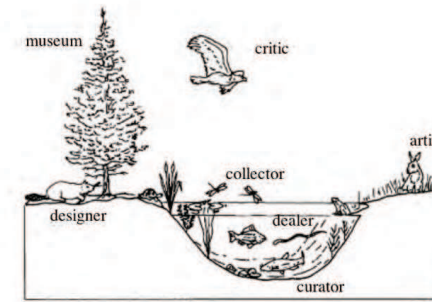
that form the foundations of our totality, universality, essence, and ground.¹² Yet how have we come to know political art? Usually in the form of something far more direct, such as a device to make current political statements, as a way of saying 'Sorry' to the Stolen Generations, for example. Or as an exploration of otherness, marginality and conflict between friend and enemy, them and us.¹³ Or as an investigation of the political condition of art, commonly known as institutional critique.

Yet there exists another type of politics for art that gets beyond readable messages and direct political signification. This is a politics of being where art as an ontological intervention challenges dominant modes of rational economics, science, and communication models propagated by everyday discourse and media mythologies. The contrast is between artists who deal with politics in a literal sense, that is, more obvious current affairs, and those who work on politics beyond the newsworthy, a politics of foundational ontological concern¹⁴. The former might be called political art and the latter 'pol-ethetics', indicating a neologistic linkage of politics, philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics. Pol-ethetic artists work under the presumption that no change in politics can occur without a challenge to the underlying structure of thinking, making and being.

1. Ian Burn, 'Conceptual Art as Art', *Art and Australia*, Vol 2, No 8, September 1970, p. 167.
2. Ian Burn, unpublished interview, 1971.
3. Ian Burn, 'Looking at Seeing and Reading', catalogue essay, *Looking at Seeing and Reading*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1993, p. 1.
4. Jacques Ranciere, *Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London, 2006, p. 9.
5. Ian Burn, title of one of his paintings.
6. Ranciere, 2006: p. 38.
7. Ranciere, 2006: p. 40.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge, 1974, Proposition 7.
9. Miguel de Beistegui, *Thinking With Heidegger*, Indiana Uni Press, 2003, p. 138.
10. Ranciere, 2006: p. 44.
11. Ranciere, 2006: p. 63.
12. Oliver Marchant, *Oliver Marchant, Postfoundational Political Thought*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 2.
13. 'Art and Politics', *Art and Research Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 2007.
14. Derrida calls it the 'ontopolitological' in his essay 'Heidegger's Ear: Philopolemy', in John Sallis (ed.), *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, Indiana University Press, 1993.

This is the first of a two-part article; the second part to be published next month (July 2013, Issue No. 261).

Mark Titmarsh is a Sydney-based artist and writer.



Mark Titmarsh, 'art landscape' diagram, undated; image courtesy the artist

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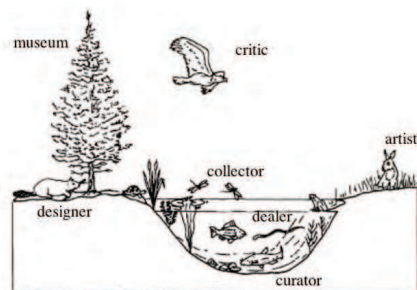
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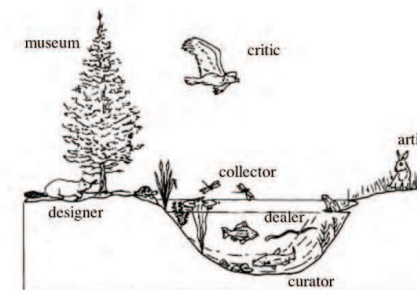
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2. Walk the Talk: the politics of artists who write, part 2





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It was not until the 1960s that the

GENRES OF ARTIST WRITINGS

An avalanche of words pours from the artist's pen in unpublished forms, private correspondence, grant applications, journals, artist books, and notebooks. Prominent examples of these are by Vincent van Gogh, Peter Beard, and George Maciunas whose various notes and diagrams have come to make up an important part of our knowledge and experience of art practice. Artists also write directly into artworks, as became significant during the time of Conceptual Art, with Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari, Joseph Kosuth, and Ian Burn, and in neo-Conceptual work by Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Christopher Wool, and Richard Prince. This lineage of word art can be traced back to Cubism where the word became an intrinsic part of experimental painting as it veered towards abstraction.

Outside of the exhibited artwork, but inspired by it, artists began to write systematically about their own context of thinking and making in publications or